

# Can Critical Thinking Skills Fostered Through Peer Feedback Lead to Better Discussions?

*Jonathan Buck*

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how critical thinking skills can be developed in the English Discussion Class (EDC). Firstly, it co-defines the goals of the EDC and examines how a different approach to critical thinking skills activity drawn from EAP writing skills research offers new ideas to EDC instructors. Through a three-week action research approach an activity pedagogy is refined based on observations of the students. This research finds some support for implementing critical thinking skills into the EDC curriculum while also finding more evidence that issues with class preparation may hinder discussion performance in general.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the EDC there has been a push towards developing various approaches to giving effective discussion feedback. Research has been shown that teacher-led feedback is effective in improving willingness to communicate (Opitz, 2014), highlighting vocabulary issues (Lowe, 2014), and increasing target language use (Turner, 2015). Peer feedback is also an effective approach particularly highlighted through post-discussion metalinguistic activities where students are asked to talk about their own discussion performance in the context of what is a ‘good’ discussion performance (Hurrell, 2014). Hurrell found that once the students got used to the process of analyzing their own performance it helped aid their own subsequent performance while providing useful information for his own feedback for students.

Peer feedback within the EDC context is something I felt worth exploring further. However, there are some limitations to using it. Issues such as a lack of metalinguistic knowledge among students to perform such feedback; the need for students to be ‘trained’ to give effective feedback (cf. Patri, 2002 for an explanation of this issue); and that the feedback can be just as effective given through teacher feedback cause such tentativeness.

Various approaches to peer feedback have often been shown to have positive benefits in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) context (Caulk, 1994; Rollinson, 2005). The use of the approach was focused more on writing feedback rather than speaking skills. The approaches were influenced by different linguistic and pedagogical aspects such as Critical Thinking skills (CT), autonomy, confidence building, focus on form, focus on content, how to recast, etc. As such, there is a large area yet unexplored in the EDC context.

In my own case I wanted to explore how peer feedback can be used to develop critical thinking skills. There are numerous peer feedback activities available to EDC instructors which focus on the frequency and use of target language e.g. ‘Did you ask for advantages/disadvantages?’ While this is useful for highlighting assessment targets, reminding students of possible ways of developing a discussion, etc. it doesn’t necessarily engage with students’ critical thinking skills.

There are issues with such a task in the EDC context. Some students would need extended training in CT skills and the necessary time cannot be dedicated to developing such skills to even see any noticeable change in performance. As such I will examine how CT activity can be developed using two of my strongest classes. Both classes are Level 2 classes, with motivated students, and most importantly learners who I feel will respond most positively to CT activities. This exploration of CT skills activities took the form of action research based on my observations of the students’ responses to the activity then refined and adjusted throughout the semester.

## DISCUSSION

### The CT activity within the EDC class

Firstly, it is important to highlight some of the restrictions of the EDC class which affect the development of a CT activity. Due to the fact that an EDC class falls within a unified curriculum and as such an activity cannot replace a required stage of the EDC class. I feel that such an activity could be used to affect a discussion performance so the activity will be designed as a post-discussion reflection activity. As explained earlier such activities often ask students to reflect on their use of target language but in this case the focus will be on broader CT ideas. Furthermore, to be able to observe any effects of the activity the reflection should occur after the first of the two regular discussions within the class. After the first discussion the students will perform a CT activity connected with the discussion and afterwards any noticeable changes will be observed in the subsequent discussion.

### Initial Design and Week 6 Implementation

The first design of this activity took aspects from different approaches to critical thinking skills. Firstly, taking Finn's (2015) approach of using argument mapping as an easy-to-understand outline for the different ways to approach discussion I considered how this visual mapping can be used in other ways to foster CT skills. Furthermore, I wanted to explore how the EDC students' response to the use of giving roles to students to focus on specific issues regarding the discussion. Kamimura (2006) found that giving roles within feedback helped focus Japanese students' attention and produced positive result when students produced writing revision. I considered whether I could observe such effects in the EDC context.

Drawing from some approaches rooted in EAP CT skills pedagogy (cf. Foundation for Critical Thinking, n.d.) I explored what 'roles' could be useful for EDC students to take to reflect on their discussion performance. It is important to highlight what skills are important to develop in the EDC context. As such I drew a list of targets and skills in this context. Note that these are goals of the learner *not* the teacher.

### Overt Goals of EDC (Hurling, 2012)

1. Use *Target Functions* effectively and accurately.
2. Use *Communication Skills* effectively and accurately.
3. Have a fluent, interactive discussion in groups of four.

### Tacit Goals of EDC

1. Improve topic-specific language knowledge
2. Build confidence in speaking English.

### Relevant CT Skills Goals

1. Respond and be guided by intellectual standards (e.g. relevance, accuracy, depth, etc.) when discussing the topic.
2. Assess and reassess the affective factors of the learners performance.
3. Successfully identify strengths and weakness in the learners own ability

While this list is by no means comprehensive they offer enough to develop the CT skills activity. The third column lists the CT skills goals which in turn are connected to the learners' performance in the first two columns. i.e. can the development of CT skills affect the overt and tacit skills of EDC students?

With this in mind a short pair work activity was designed where students are assigned two roles – *Summarizer* and *Language Master* based on the EAP roles system developed by (Furr, 2004) to be implemented in Lesson 6 (Topic – Traditional and New Media; Function - Balancing Opinions). After discussion one, students will be shuffled out of their discussion group and given a new partner. They are given three questions to consider before talking to their partner.

### Lesson 6 Activity

<u>Summarizer Questions</u>	<u>Language Master Questions</u>
1. What did you talk about in your discussion? (e.g. topics, interesting points.)	1. What English words did you not know in the discussion?
2. What follow-up questions can you ask to make this discussion better? Why?	2. What topics connected to this discussion did you not talk about? Why?
3. How could your group make the discussion better?	3. How could your group make the discussion better?

After the discussion I distributed the questions and gave the class one minute to think about their answers to the questions and gave them permission to make notes. They then had three minutes to discuss the questions

I performed the activity on my two target classes and took notes based on their performance of the activity and any notable performance results during the second discussion. For the sake of brevity, I will only highlight a few of the results of the week 6 observations. Firstly, all the learners completed the task and understood the questions. Some of their answers were, as expected, brief and slight. When what they talked about many of them rephrased the topic question rather than identified. Moreover, when they were asked about how to make the discussion better some students talked about what they learned in class (Functions and Communication Skills) but gave broad reasons such as ‘It makes the discussion better.’

Other students offered a more considered answer to the questions. When discussing the topics, they didn’t discuss one student referred to the reading homework topic of how Japan used newspapers to connect the country together. Their partner listened to the answer and offered that they could use that class’ target language to talk about it – ‘One advantage of newspapers is that you don’t need electricity’. The students were connecting the topic to the target language without need for explicit prompting. This is evidence of the learners recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses. When another pair of students talked about why their discussion was ‘not good’ they referred to the homework reading and the fact that they didn’t really think about it or the fact that they couldn’t express their ideas.

I took notes during the discussion following the CT skills activity to note if students were implementing the discoveries they had learned. I noticed one particular trait; students who had identified their *own* weaknesses nearly always tried to practice and improve on them in the second discussion. However, at this point I realized that the CT skills activity generated feedback which was mostly not immediately implementable i.e. reflecting on the homework activity, investigating gaps in vocabulary.

### **Week 8 Recalibration**

Considering what I had learned from the first CT skills experiment I decided to change the approach and design. I decided to streamline the activity and remove the roles. It seemed overcomplicating something that could be done more simply and the idea of roles is something the students needed training in and as such the meaning of them remained fuzzy. Though the general purpose of the activity didn't change it was reworded to make it easier to understand.

#### Lesson 8 Activity

1. What did you talk about in your discussion?
2. What was difficult about the discussion?
3. How could the discussion be better?
4. What do you want to practice in the next discussion?

Along with these changes I tried to deal with the issue of feedback which is not immediately implantable by splitting the activity into three stages to increase their awareness of this feedback. Firstly, before discussion one the students were shown the CT activity questions and told that they would discuss the answers to these questions after the discussion to help them think about their discussion. For the discussion the CT skills questions were taken away from the students as not to distract them. After discussion one the students, as before they were given one minute to consider their answer before being put into new pairs and given three minutes to answer the questions. After the three minutes, based on the observations I made, I asked students to report some of their answers back to the class.

This simplifying of the questions helped make the students connect their own knowledge of English discussion to their answers. The questions did not hint about what kind of answers the needed to give so, tentatively, can be evidence of their knowledge of factors affecting discussion classes. Further observations showed that in discussion two students didn't seem to be acting more on their feedback from the CT skills (both from week 6 and this class) suggesting that the three stages of the activity could be reduced or at least adapted.

### **Week 10 Recalibration**

I decided not make any changes in the design of the CT skills activity as this was my final attempt with using it. I wanted to see the effect of repeating the CT skills activity, particularly whether familiarity with the questions had any effect. The procedure changed a little. I replaced the first stage from showing the questions to the students to a simple teacher-led reflective question 'What are your weak points in English discussion?' The purpose of this was to focus students thought on their performance but without giving them too much of a cognitive load. In the week 8 experiment asking students to consider the CT skills questions during the discussion was a mistake and probably took away their opportunity focus on their discussion performance. As such I retained the post-discussion CT skills activity followed by the teacher-led review of answers.

As with the previous two weeks I saw clear examples of the students reassessing their own performance. They talked about the topic and their own ideas of 'good' discussion well. Once again without prompting students talked about the overt goals of the EDC and demonstrated evidence of CT skills by considering their ability to participate well. It was somewhat disappointing though that they referred again to their lack of preparation for the class had led to

some of their weaknesses considering that this was something they had highlighted in the previous experiments. There seemed to be an issue with their own motivation to deal with issues that required work before class. As a result of this issue I reminded the students of the pre-reading questions and post-reading questions in the text book which could help with some of the problems.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the observations of the students' performances I feel that there is some scope for the development and implementations of CT skills activities in EDC classes. With the higher-level classes I observed, I found that students responded well to identifying their strengths and weaknesses when prompted by the questions. Unfortunately, there is an issue with some of the ideas not being immediately implementable in the second discussion but it raises an interesting point about how much classroom performance is affected by the students' preparation before class. If I was going to continue using such an activity, I would consider getting students to write notes in their textbook based on the feedback from the CT skills activity which they could implement in the subsequent classes. Furthermore, I think that if CT skills activities are to be successful in the EDC context then the activity should be implemented across the 14-week course with changes to the activity made based on the features of that week's class. This study only scratches to surface of the effect of CT skills activities.

Finally, one of the biggest benefits of these activities is that students did not focus on overt EDC goals as a way to improve the discussions they drew on different ideas and showed awareness beyond the EDC goals to which they have been introduced. When dealing with the issue of their own performance students were deeply reflective and this knowledge can be used in different ways to improve performances.

## REFERENCES

- Caulk, N. (1994). Comparing teacher and student responses to written work. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(1), 181–188.
- Finn, C. (2015). Anarchy in EFL: Introducing simple activity to critical thinking skills in discussion classes. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 3, 77–86.
- Foundation for Critical Thinking. (n.d.). *Critical thinking: Identifying the targets*. Retrieved from <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-identifying-the-targets/486>
- Furr, M. (2004). *Literature circles for the EFL classroom*. Retrieved from <http://www.eflliteraturecircles.com/litcirclesforEFL.pdf>
- Hurrell, I. (2014). Experimenting with peer reflection. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 3, 89–93.
- Kamimura, T. (2006). Effects of peer feedback on EFL student writers at different levels of English proficiency: A Japanese context. *TESL Canada Journal*, 23(2), 12–39.
- Lowe, R.J. (2014). Targeting and teaching appropriate vocabulary: considering emergence and context. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 3, 110–114.
- Opitz, T. A. (2014). Reflections on willingness to communicate in an EDC classroom. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 3, 135–141.
- Patri, M. (2002). The influence of peer feedback on self and peer assessment of oral skills. *Language Testing*, 19, 109–131.
- Rollinson, P. (2005). Using peer feedback in the ESL writing class. *ELT Journal*, 59, 23–30.
- Turner, M.W. (2015). Increasing 'Initial' Focus-on-Form to Practice, Promote, and Automate Target Function Language Use. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English*

## New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

*Discussion, 3, 196-203.*